Manifesto

Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa

Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective

Abstract

Scholarship on the Afro-Asian era has tended to focus on major diplomatic events. This manifesto is a call to acknowledge the larger Afro-Asian environment in which the "Bandung moment" took place, focusing on transnational networks outside those of interstate diplomacy. This manifesto highlights the multiple modes of internationalism by which Asian and African actors navigated and subverted the power dynamics of the early Cold War, and popularised Afro-Asianism at the local level. In approaching decolonization from the point of view of the Global South, we advocate a collaborative approach that brings together findings from multiple archives and regional specialties, both enabling and sharing research from the point of archival inquiry to dissemination. While recognizing the unique insights of archives, we seek to harness the possibilities of digital humanities in allowing us to expand research and collaborate with both academic and non-academic participants across the world.

Keywords: Afro-Asia, decolonization, internationalism, digital humanities, collaborative research

If the Third World was a project to which millions contributed, then historians have yet to unravel the many threads by which they did so and to approach its history with the spirit with which it was originally imagined: one that sought communication and solidarity across difference.[1] The gathering of political elites at the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung has garnered a great deal of scholarly attention as the key event heralding a new era of solidarity in the decades of Asian and African decolonization.[2] With the exception of Laura Bier's chapter in Christopher Lee's *Making a World After Empire* on the connections between Egyptian and Indonesian women's movements in the Bandung era, little has been written on the way in which nonstate actors throughout the Global South interacted and conversed with each other.[3] The 1950s and 1960s were not just an era of postcolonial diplomacy, but a period of intensive social and cultural interaction across the decolonizing

world. African and Asian women, socialists, communists, trade unionists, intellectuals, activists, and revolutionaries conversed across national, linguistic, and ideological borders. Artists, poets, and performers travelled and experimented with new ideas and techniques for intellectual and cultural expression to create new visions for the nation and for the world. They engaged critically with communist, socialist, and democratic ideas in circulation, constantly reevaluated their political loyalties, and built up networks of intellectual and radical sociability. Outside the key sites of international diplomacy, we know much less about the way in which actors across the South conversed with each other in the early Cold War era. At the same time, the methods of our historical discipline and the institutional structures that govern research continue to devalue scholarship outside the Western academy and to underrepresent the voices of women and people of color. In other words, researchers need to ask new questions together and encourage practices that do not reinforce the hierarchies that the decolonizing world has sought to overcome.

This Manifesto is a call to acknowledge the larger Afro-Asian environment in which the "Bandung moment" took place. A more inclusive history of this period requires a research agenda that takes the focus away from the interstate relations found in official records and moves it onto networks created and maintained by actors that are harder to identify in the archive. Rather than view this era through the lens of diplomatic relations or particular nation-states, we outline a research agenda that privileges transnational networks of affinity across Asia and Africa, while also inviting research that expands these networks to other geographies across the South. This is a call to discover the different types of mobility and horizontal connection that characterized South-South relations and to see vectors of solidarity alongside the competitive, hierarchical, and familial nature of new South-South relationships of the postcolonial generation. But this Manifesto is also a call to recognize the need for collaborative history in approaching decolonization from the point of view of the

Global South. This requires radical changes in academic historical practice. As scholars based at Euro-American universities, we are implicated in the privileges of the current system even as we look to readjust its inequalities and limitations. In order to fully understand the dynamics of South-South connections, we need to orient our vision to one that traces these networks, subverts the boundaries of Area Studies, and abandons the "lone-scholar" model in the writing of a truly global history of decolonization.

Modes of Internationalism

The era of Afro-Asian solidarity in the mid-twentieth century was composed of multiple modes of internationalism. In shifting our view from interstate diplomacy, we see new internationalisms that intersected and overlapped with each other and transnational actors who belonged to multiple, sometimes competing international organizations. As the lead image from *Spotlight on Africa*'s 1955 issue on the Bandung conference (Figure 1) shows, it is, above all, individuals and people who comprised the Afro-Asian world, and we place them at the heart of our analyses. We seek to uncover the worlds of intermediaries who navigated multiple internationalisms and placed them at the heart of postcolonial nation-building: Asian socialists who moved in and out of the realms of power; writers, artists, and athletes both celebrated and vilified by states; Caribbean, and African American trade unionists who travelled both Africa and Asia. In this era, people moved between nationalism and internationalism in a manner that defies scholarly obsession with this supposed dichotomy. Instead, we want to unearth the principles and ideas that guided them. This changes our understanding of the nature of global society itself. The claims to globalism of internationalist organizations based in New York, London, Brussels, or Moscow were wholly dependent on interactions with multilingual actors in Asia and Africa who contested Western frameworks and channeled their own forms of internationalism through these expanding networks.

This era of competing internationalisms puts the Afro-Asian moment *in* the Cold War, but does not make it *of* the Cold War. Asian and African actors navigated, ignored, and subverted the power dynamics of the Cold War. The highly mobile activists, writers, scientists, and artists of the Afro-Asian moment encountered visa regimes, boycotts, censorship, and other obstacles to the free movement of people and ideas. A certain amount of navigation was therefore necessary. Mobility was a key feature of this era; air travel enabled these actors to meet and erase distances. But the cost of this travel put up new barriers, as patronage from competing powers—Western, Soviet, and Chinese—as well as home-grown capitalists often decided who could move across newly constructed borders.

This was an era defined by imagined as well as actual movement. Indeed, Afro-Asianism at a popular, public level almost cheerfully ignored the imagined geographies of the Cold War. Central Asia, for instance, was very much part of Afro-Asian initiatives, as seen with the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent as well as the presence of Uzbek and Tajik intellectuals and Bukharan dancers in other Afro-Asian gatherings. Indeed, internationalism was not just the domain of a burgeoning, multilingual civil society and creative class. It intimately tied distant worlds and worldviews into the lived experiences of actors in small landlocked towns. Consider the 1954 marches for Afro-Asian peace in northern Indian cities like Gwalior and Patiala, or the call for Afro-Asian solidarity in women's groups across the Indonesian archipelago. This is a level of international engagement well below that of the highbrow ideological commitment to global governance, and it is indicative of a much more pervasive mentality of internationalism than is currently accounted for in historiography.

What is also clear is that approaching "Bandung" as a network of affinity and awareness forces us to ask more questions about the temporal frames we use to define this era. The presentation of Bandung as a "break" from the past sought to address a number of

issues, including conceptions of freedom and liberation, of history and civilization, and of methods of communication across difference. Yet it is possible to view people moving within different temporal frames depending on the questions they are seeking to address. The 1966 Tricontinental Conference came to widen this frame to include Latin America, and as a recent conference in Coimbra on its legacies showed, the individuals, organizations and networks involved at Bandung, Cairo, Havana, Algiers, and beyond often grew out of and in relation to each other. Similar questions about how imperialism functioned, what freedom and liberation actually looked like, and how to achieve these goals animated these networks across the temporality of "Bandung" or the "Tricontinental." Is there a moment at which one ends and the other begins? Research into the individuals and organizations that connected these movements can help us to better understand how their ideas shifted over time and blur the boundaries implied by Afro-Asianism as well as imperial and Cold War frameworks.

New methodologies

This research agenda requires collaboration in a way that is not common practice in the academy. The global reach and local impact of these networks cannot be seen fully unless a sizeable group of regional experts can view this "moment" from multiple archives, languages, and perspectives. This requires working across the regional boundaries created by Area Studies—regional divisions with their own political roots, from the invention of the "Middle East" and "Southeast Asia" to the academic "erasure" of Central Asia. Importantly, this type of collaborative history also forces us to think past the single-authored articles lauded by our institutions. We call for an attitudinal shift where research is not "owned" or "discovered," but enabled and shared. While collaborative research is essential to truly global, multicentered historical research, it goes unrecognized by promotion criteria and national research assessments. We propose that continuous, "real-time" collaboration—from project conception to group archival research, source-sharing, and online collaborative spaces—both

enriches individual research and provides the diversity of viewpoints essential to understanding the networked history of early Cold War Afro-Asia in all its complexity.

It was precisely this *collaborative* approach to the archive that formed the foundation for our network. Over the course of one week, twelve of us worked together in the reading room of the International Institute of Social History (IISH), the world's most important collection of materials on social and emancipatory movements. We delved into a range of sources, from pamphlets of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization in Cairo to the newsletters of the Anti-Colonial Bureau in Rangoon. Several researchers worked on the archive of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. The opportunity for researchers with different regional specialisms to collaborate in real time allowed us to track commonalities, linkages, and cleavages between African, Asian, and Western activists committed to building a new postcolonial world. This yielded new insights on the modes of internationalism that may have taken years for a single scholar to piece together on their own. It is impossible to achieve a full picture of the internationalism of this era by working in a single archive—it depends instead on the ability of scholars operating within different regional contexts and distinct historiographies to pull together multiple archival threads. Alongside the archives of the IISH, we depend on our own familiarity with the regional contexts in which Asian and African actors interacted with new international bodies, drawing on state archives in Asia and Africa, newspapers, associational literature, memoirs, artistic production, and oral history interviews. Collaborative research enriches the very practice of history itself; moreover, it is essential in uncovering the rich, world-spanning experiences of the international Left, particularly in Asia and Africa. Out of this collaborative research, we are preparing a special collection on the way in which trade union networks crystallized many of the solidarities and cleavages that characterized the transnational left in the early ages of

the Cold War, as well as an additional collection on wider movements undertaken by artists, intellectuals, athletes, and activists across the Global South.

We recognize that we now live in a world undergoing a frenzy of digitization. This has obvious benefits in allowing archives to make sources available to those unable to travel and collaborate and has helped to stimulate new appetites for transnational history. But these opportunities come at the risk of decontextualization, which, as Lara Putnam has pointed out in the *American Historical Review* last year, is a worrying feature of working digitally and may even help perpetuate knowledge hegemonies of the global North.[4] We maintain that there are still virtues to place-based research and to digesting archives in their fully material context. This is especially so for Asian and African archives, which are so often unevenly digitized, as well as for the "grey literature" of international institutions—the reams of memos, reports, paper machinery of organizations and institutions, and substrata of bureaucratic documentation—impossible to digitize in their magnitude, but out of which truly subaltern histories of internationalism can be woven. Here, dialogues between archivists and historians may help create more support for collaborative enterprise.

The "digital" has become one of the most important sites of knowledge production in the twenty-first century, and while we welcome its potential, we also hope to encourage critical postcolonial engagement with its geopolitics.[5] On the one hand, we seek to prevent the digital humanities from unwittingly reproducing the inequalities of global knowledge production that embedded systemic Eurocentrism in the Western academy.[6] On the other, we seek ways to bridge digital humanities ecosystems that are rarely in dialogue with each other, often because they are unable or unwilling to speak past national and linguistic barriers. Our research has begun to show that Afro-Asianism was a transnational and translingual project, as well as one that sought to assert the subjecthood of Global South actors. If this is to be fully represented in digital space, we need to reconfigure our methods as much as the

disciplinary and cartographic divides that have arisen out of area studies models and nation-making paradigms.[7] It is for this reason that, against the grain of present structures of academic incentive, we believe in scholarship that expands rather than territorializes knowledge. We have begun to envision digital components to our project that embody these convictions. Our blog, medium.com/afro-asian-visions, was built with openness in mind and has already begun to expand our research network, widen our perspectives, and reach out to others working on similar themes. We have also produced a dynamic visualization that charts the lesser-known conferences and gatherings in which Afro-Asian networks converged, as well as biographies of those who traversed the Afro-Asian world. This comes as a product of our collaborative research, built on a database infrastructure designed to be as open as possible to contributors from academic institutions as well as nonacademic participants across the world—including and especially from the Global South.

In short, we seek to resurrect the Bandung spirit in our academic collaborations, repurposed for the digital age. We invite you to join us.

The Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective is a continuously expanding international network of scholars working on Afro-Asianism in the early Cold War. It began as a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) directed by Su Lin Lewis (Bristol University) and Carolien Stolte (Leiden University). The project maintains a static website (http://afroasiannetworks.com/) as well as a blog (https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions). Co-led by Rachel Leow (Cambridge University), we are producing a moving historical map of events and individuals uncovered through our collective research.

Notes

This manifesto is a product of conversations among members of the Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective. It was written jointly by Reem Abou-El-Fadl, Leslie James, Rachel Leow, Su Lin Lewis, Gerard McCann, and Carolien Stolte.

1. Prashad, *The Darker Nations*.

2. Tan and Acharya, *Bandung Revisited*; Lee, *Making a World After Empire*; Miscovic, Fisher-Tine, and Boskovska, *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War;* Finnane, *Bandung 1955;* Shimazu, "Diplomacy as Theatre;" Menon, "Bandung is Back."

3. Bier, "Feminism, Solidarity, and Identity."

4. Putnam, "The Transnational and the Text-Searchable."

5. Lothian and Phillips, "Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?" See also the *Decolonizing the Digital / Digital Decolonization* project at the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities at Duke University https://globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/volume-31–decolonizing-the-digitaldigital-decolonization.

6. McPherson, "Why are the Digital Humanities So White?" See also the work of Mark Graham, e.g., "Inequitable Distributions in Internet Geographies."

7. Digital humanities projects and initiatives that have already begun to do this, including the Mellon Global South Initiative http://ihgc.as.virginia.edu/mellon-global-south-initiative and the Cornell Global South Project http://www.globalsouthproject.cornell.edu/.

References

Bier, Laura. 2010. "Feminism, Solidarity, and Identity in the Age of Bandung." In *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives,* edited by Christopher Lee, 143–72. Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press.

Finnane, Antonia. 2010. *Bandung 1955: Little Histories.* Caulfield: Monash University Press.

Graham, Mark. 2014. "Inequitable Distributions in Internet Geographies: The Global South is Gaining Access but Lags in Local Content." *Innovations* 9, no. 3–4: 17–34.

Lee, Christopher, ed. 2010. *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives.* Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press.

Lothian, Alexis and Amanda Phillips. 2013. "Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?" *Journal of e-Media Studies* 3, no. 1 http://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/xmlpage/4/article/425.

McPherson, Tara. 2012. "Why are the Digital Humanities So White? Or, Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation." In *Debates in the Digital Humanities.* Print edition Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, online edition http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/29.

Menon, Dilip. 2014. "Bandung is Back: Afro-Asian Affinities." *Radical History Review,* 119: 241–245.

Miscovic, Natasa, Harald Fisher-Tine, and Nada Boskovska, eds. 2014. *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi, Bandung, Belgrade.* London/New York: Routledge.

Prashad, Vijay. 2008. *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World.* New York: The New Press.

Putnam, Laura. 2016. "The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast." *American Historical Review* 121: 377–402.

Shimazu, Naoko. 2014. "Diplomacy as Theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955." *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 1: 225–52.

Tan, Seng, and Amitav Acharya, eds. 2008. *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order.* Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.